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# Gender disenfranchisement in Hong Kong churches

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## ABSTRACT

Notwithstanding developments in the advancement of gender equity in secular and non-secular contexts, women still remain profoundly unable to access leadership roles globally and traverse the entrenched barriers of gender bias in institutionalized sexism. In order to disrupt conditions of gender disenfranchisement, persistent efforts are required to expose and challenge the status quo of embedded gender-organizational dynamics. This paper focuses attention on understanding the current phenomenon of gender marginalizing treatment within the male-dominated workplace of the Church in Hong Kong, by examining one pervasive aspect of gender inequality: vertical segregation. This shows how Hong Kong clergywomen are not exempt from gender-biased treatment, but instead are compelled to practice and work under deeply-gendered and hierarchical conditions.

**KEYWORDS** Gender disenfranchisement; Hong Kong; churches; clergy women; institutionalized sexism

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## Introduction

The injustice of gender discrimination in both secular and non-secular work settings has been a perennial concern in the global context. Women in male-dominated workplaces have been subjected to institutionalized sexism inherent in organizational structures, which obstructs them from accessing equal and comparable rights and resources to progress. These structures exist as much in the ecclesiastical work context as they do in other settings such as the corporate world. The barriers of institutionalized sexism reinforce and maintain work cultures which are hostile to women, compounding the challenges they face and have to overcome despite efforts to promote gender equity in contemporary society. While valuable research has been published regarding sexism in other church contexts, the experience of Hong Kong clergywomen who work in the male-dominated

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environment of the church has remained understudied. The present paper thus aims to address this gap in research and focus attention on this unique context and explore the prevalence of gender marginalizing practices within its churches.

I first survey the global gendered pattern of organizations, most specifically the church. I then review how existing patterns of gender discrimination are most prominently manifested and, from that perspective, situate Hong Kong within the worldwide stage, to explore the state of affairs in its local churches. As a first step, I address the current paucity of attention focused on the gendered experiences of clergywomen here and then present a small case study of one aspect of gender inequality that is acutely visible both in the global context and in Hong Kong: vertical segregation. This aspect of occupational gender inequality refers to the significant and persistent gender asymmetries in the configuration of the workforce where women are consistently marginalized in leadership roles of power and decision-making despite increased female participation (Poggio, 2010, p. 428). Examples of this phenomenon include the continuing and exclusive concentration of women in clerical or lower ranking management positions in companies (Reskin & Roos, 2009, pp. 154–162).

## Methodology

This paper is the first part in a series that focuses on conditions of gender exclusion in the churches of Hong Kong. I proceed by first reviewing the conditions of gender marginalizing treatments globally, in both secular and church contexts, before turning to discrimination against clergywomen. Following this, I will turn to assess the state of inequitable treatment of these women within the specific context of churches in Hong Kong. In order to do this, I conducted a small-scale quantitative study in the form of a survey to investigate the gendered distribution of roles of senior pastor and those in charge of children's ministries from 51 Protestant churches in Hong Kong. This sample offers a representation of an estimated 1300 Protestant churches here, whose participants serve in major international denominations and in smaller indigenous denominations including Anglican, Baptist, Christian and Missionary Alliance, Lutheran, Methodist, and Pentecostal congregations, both in Chinese- and English-speaking settings (GovHK, 2016).

I contacted the churches initially by email to introduce myself, present the aim of my study and seek their participation. My survey included questions that asked participants to state the gender of the senior pastors of their churches and the persons in charge of their children's ministries. Most of them replied by email within two weeks; only a few required follow up via direct phone calls. The results of this were compiled in a table for analysis and revealed a distinctive segregation of roles along gender lines, with

over 89 percent of senior leadership roles (senior pastors) occupied by men and 95 percent of those working in children's ministries by women. Two more articles in this series use a qualitative research methodology to examine the lived experience of Hong Kong clergywomen (Yih, [in press a](#), [in press b](#)).

## **Gender discrimination across organizations**

Women clergy, as pastoral leaders who serve in church settings, are subjected to organizational challenges of gender that are inherent in all types of organizations. According to the sociologist Joan Acker (1990, p. 139), all hierarchical organizations, religious or secular, are gendered and loci of male dominance. It is therefore no surprise that women clergy, similar to their counterparts in other professions, are subjected to gendered treatment, for example, with respect to expectations, communication, and implicit bias and prejudice in performing leadership roles in male-dominated church settings (Percy, 2017, p. 99).

In fact, women clergy may be even more vulnerable to gender bias at work compared to those in secular occupations since "institutional religion is inherently and irrecoverably patriarchal and can be detrimental to women's attainment of liberation and power" (Kawahashi, 2000, p. 85). This deeply gendered and hierarchical ecclesiastical organization, with its multitude of entrenched cultural and structural barriers before women, has been described by Barbara Bagilhole as one "in which the all-male enclave at the pinnacle of power was protected" (2006, p. 109). Similarly, other studies have shown how the clergy has continually adopted gender marginalizing practices (Smarr et al., 2018, p. 378) such as biased leadership ranking (Thomas, 2013) and the ongoing tolerance for prejudiced attitudes about women being subordinate to their male counterparts (Banks, 2012). An abundance of such discriminatory examples reflect the prevalence of gender differences in pastorate practice and have been documented by scholars in the disciplines of theology, sociology, psychology, political science and economics (Hamman, 2010, p. 770).

Research has consistently revealed that female clergy share many experiences with women in other occupations and endure inferior work conditions and workplace inequalities (McDuff, 2001, p. 1; Nesbitt, 1996, p. 181). One common experience is the presence of "glass ceilings," a popular image denoting the barriers that prevent their professional advancement at certain points in their careers. According to Bagilhole (2006, p. 115), the reality of glass ceilings is a pertinent reflection of the "structural disadvantage" embedded within gendered organizations and is a form of institutional sexism. In the secular corporate environment, senior management remains a significant barrier for women to overcome, which very few are able to negotiate (Bagilhole, 1994). Similarly, in the context of ecclesiastical practice, women clergy have had career trajectories that are limited by religious

rules and androcentric policies that support the advancement of clergymen (Smarr et al., 2018).

The patriarchal structure within which these women work is principally shaped and designed according to the interests, needs and experience of men, positioning the latter rather than the former for career success (Wajcman, 2013, p. 160). An example of how this androcentric model contributes to structural disadvantage for women such as glass ceilings is the corporate expectation of uninterrupted, full-time employment without career breaks or working hours designed for men's life-cycle patterns and experiences (Acker, 2015, p. 423). In the case of clergywomen, this structural disadvantage is seen in the assumption that a clerical role is one where "constant availability is considered essential" (Finch, 2012, p. 30). This impacts women pastoral leaders disproportionately as they have time-consuming roles outside of work that have been traditionally assigned to women such as child-care and care of the elderly (Marks et al., 2009). Other than the expectation of constant availability, the masculine culture of gendered organizations is also characterized by long working hours, which further marginalizes and hinders women in their career progression, should they also want to dedicate themselves partly to their family lives (Liff & Ward, 2001).

Sexist career models stump women in advancing their careers even before they enter the pastorate. Gender bias is evident in recruitment and selection processes that affect the prospects of women employees negatively (Davison & Burke, 2000), given the opaque system of informal referrals employed within organizations (Bagilhole, 2006, p. 116). This organizational selection leads to additional barriers for women in obtaining jobs and perpetuates systematic discrimination, which hinders them "from attaining positions of authority and leadership beyond token representation" (Nesbitt, 1997, p. 596).

Women who overcome the recruitment process successfully, encounter further challenges during the contractual phase of their employment. Here, other types of gender-associated challenges that impact them while at work are found such as "contractual segregation." This issue relates to inequity in contract status and access to high-quality contracts. While this is a general concern seen in other professional fields (Knights & Richards, 2003, p. 213), such discriminatory practice also applies to women in the church, where the types and quality of positions available to them, compared to men, vary. For instance, once they enter the male-dominated work force, there is greater likelihood that they would be employed in part-time or short-time contracts. Such prejudiced treatment of women, compared to the opportunities available to men, is also seen in contracts that exclude remuneration, give lower salaries or relegate the former to smaller congregations (Stewart-Thomas, 2010, p. 408). All of these factors diminish prospects of career mobility and advancement for clergy women (Stewart-Thomas, 2010; Zikmund et al., 1998, p. 70).

Apart from delays in securing jobs and the contractual inequalities women face, the gender-biased processes inherent in organizations also represent discriminatory treatment (Styhre, 2014, p. 105). For example, they may receive lower pay and tend to be placed disproportionately in lower positions in the stratified organizational hierarchy or assigned different roles. Hence, although women are increasingly entering male-dominated spheres of work, which leads to reduction in the severity of horizontal segregation or the extent to which men and women are placed in different roles and occupations (Blackburn & Jarman, 1997), which is different from vertical segregation that represents discrimination that persists due to gender demarcations regarding their expected roles, while the former refers to women's exclusive concentration in clerical or lower ranking management positions in companies (Reskin & Roos, 2009, pp. 154–162). In the case of clergywomen, vertical segregation is evident in the greater likelihood of their being assigned certain types of tasks such as in children's ministries, smaller rural congregations, or non-parish settings like hospitals and universities (Bagilhole, 2006). Clergywomen, both in North America and the UK, represent the experience of vertical segregation where there are a large number of women priests in non-stipendiary positions in the Church of England (Jones, 2004), while in the US many are assigned marginalized roles with poor pay and promotional prospects (Nesbitt, 1997, p. 596).

As noted above, women in secular and ecclesiastical settings are subject to institutionalized sexism inherent in organizational structures that constantly prohibit them from accessing equal and comparable resources for career progression. These deeply entrenched barriers reinforce and maintain a work culture which is hostile to women, compounding the challenges they have to overcome. Such an organizational culture is also seen to be damaging for the interaction of women with their male colleagues at work, for instance, "the use of sarcasm, raised voices, jokes, veiled insults or the patronizing put down" (Ramazanoglu, 1987, p. 61) and overt sexual harassment that seek to minimize women's composure and work performance (Lorber, 2008, p. 250). These practices of sexual domination contribute to the perpetuation of a male-dominated hierarchy and tolerance for patronizing masculinist practices (Hearn, 1989, p. 176). Women priests are not exempt from this and are also reportedly impacted adversely by the negative exchanges they experience with male colleagues, lay congregations, and other women clergy (Bagilhole, 2006, p. 119; Stewart-Thomas, 2010, p. 408).

### **Gender discrimination specific to clergywomen**

Apart from the experience of gender-biased treatment which clergywomen share with women in secular work contexts, the former face additional hurdles within the church that they are compelled to deal with while

assuming leadership roles. As mentioned earlier, women priests in the pastorate context are not only exposed to similar discriminatory barriers as do women who work in other male-dominated occupations, but are also more vulnerable to specific gender-biased oppression by the church. For instance, the Church of England explicitly acknowledges “gender as a constitutive element in organizational logic,” in contrast with secular modern bureaucratic organizations, which make efforts to obscure gendered processes “through a gender-neutral, asexual discourse” (Acker, 1990, p. 140). In fact, the intense struggles faced by the women clergy led Bagilhole (2006, p. 110) to alter the metaphor of “glass ceiling” with “lead roof” to capture the impenetrable type of barriers female priests encounter while undertaking leadership roles within the church. Gender disparities in pay and employment opportunities among professional clergy are well documented (Prichard, 1996; Tucker, 1996), which include conditions such as the disproportionate limitations of professional upward mobility and inferior work conditions or rewards available to women clergy (McDuff, 2001, p. 2, 4).

Alex D. J. Fry (2019, pp. 21–22) examined the presence of sexism in the attitudes of the male clergy towards women’s ordination. He refers to this as a form of gender complementarity, or benevolent sexism, according to which each sex is said to be better suited to certain roles in society. More specifically, he underscores the insidious nature of the discriminatory attitude of men that serves to validate their sexism by confining women to restricted roles and by undermining their abilities. By connecting the attitudes of the male clergy to their rationalization for preserving their privileged status, control, and dominance over women, Fry’s view resonates with and further confirms the undiminished gender discrimination faced by women leaders in the Church.

The Church has continually played a significant role in marginalizing women by resolutely upholding a deeply-rooted patriarchal ideology. This denotes the belief that men are superior and need to control women who are to be subordinate as part of God’s will (Wood, 2019, p. 2). Despite changes in the general role of women in society over the past two centuries, the Church—together with other institutions that have similarly entrenched patriarchal roots such as education, politics, science, art, and the economy—has adopted a stance which resists and decelerates the advancement of women’s roles, preventing them from being perceived as equally valuable as men (Johnson, 2014, p. 17).

This systemic gender discrimination that allows male dominance and control has historically been justified by the Church via its interpretation of the creation and fall narratives in Genesis to justify the subjugation of women (Wood, 2019, p. 4; Valentine, 2013, p. 228). As Gilbert M. Valentine (2013) points out, the transformation in the general understanding of women’s roles by the Church has not radically evolved following seventeenth

century depictions of women as rebellious and seductive, closely linked to the biblical Eve. Even after an abundance of emerging research that indicates great similarities rather than differences between men and women, this continues to be discredited and disbelieved by wider society and the Church (Connell, 2002, p. 42). The disbelief regarding women being equal to men by the Church is perpetuated with its refrain for utilizing a more women-affirming lens for interpreting biblical texts. Thereby, it endorses and sanctifies the gendered allocation of religious duties (Stewart-Thomas, 2010, p. 409). Furthermore, apart from appealing to certain scriptural texts to address the resistance of the Church to change in women's roles, they are also marginalized by its erasure regarding their significance and visibility in the main narrative that tends to replace women's historical presence with "misogynist narratives" (DeConick, 2011, p. 147). An example of this can be found in the historical records of Japan's Anglican Episcopal Church, which fail to testify to the existence of women evangelists and missionaries, "rendering them powerless and invisible" from the early years (Mei, 2017, p. 38).

In the New Testament, evidence of women's presence and active contribution to the development of the Christian faith (Remedios, 2016, p. 8), together with Jesus' defiance of patriarchal treatment and attitudes towards women, when he called them to follow him in the ministry (Collins, 2010, p. 87), have not been sufficient to transform the views of the Church Fathers, who instead have promoted the inferiority of women to men. This has furthered the erasure and suppression of women and their roles by the Church (Wood, 2019, p. 4). From this early Christian Church's initial mindset, and despite current society's professed value and belief in gender equality as of the latter half of the twentieth century, systemic patriarchal gender discrimination has not shifted dramatically here (Brown & Woodhead, 2016).

There have, however, been monumental developments in women's advancement from utter invisibility in the organizational structure of the church (Wallace, 1997, p. 10) to the current state, especially with the arrival of the milestone of women's ordination,<sup>1</sup> but this has been seen as an "ambiguous welcome" and "there are still profound inequalities in the Church's treatment of women in leadership" (Percy, 2017, p. 90). One contributing factor may relate to the ingrained social perception of leadership styles and gendered roles, which continually shape and maintain female marginalization and perpetuate barriers such as the "dual employment tracks for men and women clergy" (McDuff, 2001, p. 4).

A significant body of research in the 1990s supported gender as a key predictor of leadership styles and categorized women and men to have distinctive personality traits that impacted their leadership capacities and suitability (Cheung, 1997, p. 137). For example, research that examines such characteristics and leadership has generally seen men as possessing agentic traits or



being aggressive, ambitious, confident, and competitive. In contrast, women have been identified with communal traits in being affectionate, nurturing, and gentle in their leadership (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001, p. 783). Specifically, women have been deemed as innately “disadvantaged” by possessing “feminine traits,” which conflict with the skillsets of successful leaders in corporate positions within the organizational world (Fagenson, 1990, p. 268).

Scholars such as Fanny Cheung have argued that the focus on gender differences has been key to the exclusion of women from attaining leadership roles in secular and non-secular realms (Cheung, 1997, p. 133). However, ongoing research has subsequently shown that there are other factors that predict a person’s suitability and capability for leadership, apart from this simplistic dichotomized division of “feminine” or “masculine” traits. One example of such an alternative consideration concerns the psychological perception of self-efficacy as a strong predictor for effective leadership (Paglis, 2010). As defined by social cognitive theory or social learning theory, self-efficacy describes a person’s belief in their own ability to successfully complete a particular task (Bandura, 1997). This important factor for determining leadership potential significantly influences behaviors such as goal setting, effort, and persistence, all of which closely relate to successful performance by leaders.

The social perception of distinct gender traits remains a dominant aspect that influences women’s opportunities for assuming leadership roles and cements existing barriers of bias, despite studies that show things to the contrary and favor women’s leadership style especially in religious organizations. The “feminine traits” that underpin the communal leadership style, which previously “disadvantaged” women such as their ability to relate and collaborate more inclusively and creatively (Carter, 2012, p. 2), have subsequently been prized as leadership qualities, suitable and necessary for fostering a community that is “consistent with the values of religious life” (Nygren & Ukeritis, 1993, p. 168). Differences associated with gender in terms of relational qualities and communication behaviors, and their implications for leadership within a ministerial setting, have been subjects of research in the past. Barbara Finlay highlights men’s tendencies to orientate towards “legalism,” adopting postures to “power over” their congregation, compared with women clergy who “empower” their communities through more informal, egalitarian leadership styles (Finlay, 1996, p. 311).

Despite these arguments, which support women clergy in their being distinctly gifted for leadership roles within the Church, resistance towards them has not only not been found to reduce but instead has escalated, with patriarchal and sexist treatments reported regularly (Hamman, 2010, p. 769). Examples of resistance by those who disapprove of women’s presence—and who feel they have trespassed perceived gender boundaries of “women-only spaces” to participate in male-dominated arenas—are

sometimes expressed via sexual harassment (Bagilhole, 2006; Lind, 2005; Manville, 1997, p. 37). Feminist authors have long argued that the mistreatment of women is endemic in organizations and employed by those in more powerful and privileged status to exclude them from employment (Hanrahan, 1997, p. 44; Spender, 1985; Thomas & Kitzinger, 1997). This form of gender violence is well recognized as one of organizational process (Harris et al., 2020, p. 661) and views the organization as “a participant in the violence” (Harris, 2013, p. 568).

Organizational dynamics that contribute to sexual harassment include policies (Dougherty & Goldstein Hode, 2016, p. 1729), cultural norms (Brunner & Dever, 2014), and poor reporting practices. Sexual teasing and harassment are particularly prevalent in organizations, characterized by larger power differentials between strata (McDonald, 2012, p. 8) and a history of tolerance for gender power imbalance (Han, 2020, p. 227). Organizational cultures with deep patriarchal roots, such as the Church, silence and restrain women from protesting so as to be seen as congenial and “good sports.” These, in turn, eliminate their potential for advancement in the corporate hierarchy (Stewart-Thomas, 2010, p. 409) and normalize forms of violence as inevitable features of the corporate culture which is not to be challenged but endured (McDonald, 2012, p. 11). It is worth mentioning here that in spite of the presence of these prevalent forms of oppressive organizational dynamics, studies have also revealed the courageous endeavors of some clergywomen who have actively sought ways to resist and bring about changes in the oppressive culture they are immersed in, so as to attain a sense of ownership and accountability (Chong, 2008). One such example is of the women clergy of the Christian Church in Mexico who use their leadership roles to express their faith creatively and develop their own theologies through storytelling and the visual arts, thereby bypassing male intervention (Moreno, 2019, p. 118).

## **Gender discrimination in Hong Kong churches**

In a context, where both general inherent organizational and non-secular systemic sexism affect the presence of women in leadership roles in the Church, the case of Hong Kong is illustrative. Studies on organizational injustice and gender bias here have demonstrated that women are subjected to greater levels of gender discrimination than men. For example, a study by the Gender Research Center at the Chinese University of Hong Kong reveals that gender is a pivotal factor influencing opportunities of potential candidates for ordination and the types of roles on offer to them once they are ordained (Foley et al., 2005, p. 442). The experience of women vis-à-vis work-related barriers is comparable to the outline presented above. This is not surprising, as Hong Kong has historically been exposed to western

influence in business and employment practices, despite significant cultural differences (Fields et al., 2000). In fact, inequality may affect Chinese women in Hong Kong even more than their western counterparts, as research shows that the former express a more profound perception of sex-role differentiation than, say, American subjects (Bond, 1995, p. 45).

To assess the presence and significance of gendered treatment within the Hong Kong churches, I conducted a survey of 51 randomly selected churches here to investigate the distribution of men and women in the roles of senior pastors and those in charge of children's ministries. This sample represented different Protestant churches here as it included participants from both Chinese-speaking and English-speaking congregations. The data I gathered indicated that over 89 percent of senior leadership roles were occupied by men and 95 percent of those who ran children's ministries were women. When looking at this through the focused lens of gender, it was evident that the distribution of roles in these churches—with a sharp divide in the predominance of men in senior and more authoritative positions and women in more marginalized ones—reflected the pervasiveness of gender discrimination in the professional context of the church. Vertical segregation, with a disproportionate distribution of leadership roles favoring men, who dominate in the top-ranking positions of the organizational hierarchy of the church, was unambiguously clear in the present sample. The incontestable presence of gender inequity, reflected by the male dominance in leadership positions in the churches, showed that the “lead roof” clergywomen in western contexts face is something women in pastorate practice in Hong Kong do so as well.

Similar to experiences of women ministers in mainland China, which is shaped by “traditional Confucian gender stereotypes and attitudes toward women,” clergywomen in Hong Kong are likewise influenced and challenged by comparable cultural viewpoints and expectations (Hua, 2018, p. 123). Accordingly, in Hong Kong the gender-stereotypical qualities and role divisions between Chinese men and women are more pronounced, for example, there is greater expectation for their social roles to be unambiguously distinct (Søndergaard & Hofstede, 2001). For instance, Chinese men tend to occupy higher-status roles and express more agentic qualities, such as being more assertive and competitive, while women are inclined to display gender-stereotypical communal traits of being nurturing and selfless (Crosby, 1982, p. 16). This is also evident in my data, wherein women were mainly assigned roles in the church that involved children's ministries. Thus, churches in Hong Kong reserve the nurturing, family-oriented roles for women, who have problems in accessing senior ones, as only 5.45 percent of them become senior pastors. The deeply entrenched stereotypical communal traits of women impede their entry into leadership roles and limit their career mobility, while men are given opportunities to

progress in roles that require “agentic” qualities considered appropriate for senior leaders.

Cultural expectations of sex-role differentiation, ingrained in Chinese tradition and characterized by gender asymmetry (Wang, 1998, p. 42), exacerbate stereotypes that impact women-clergy leaders in Hong Kong’s ministerial setting, which has been described as “characterized by authoritarian, patriarchal leadership and cultures that routinely silence the voices of women” (Tso, 2018, p. 388). The prevalence of this subordination of women is most alarmingly illustrated in the way local churches address incidents of sexual harassment, as complaints were commonly met by avoidance and persistent refusal to address them as serious violations (Tso, 2018, p. 392). This evasive manner of dealing with sexual violence in the church, rather than addressing the needs of victims, has been described as “backwards” and caused further harm by “adding insult to injury or secondary victimization” (Tso, 2018, p. 389, 393). Echoing Gail Murphy-Geiss’s (2007, p. 271) argument that sexual violence in church is a special genre among gender issues, I am sensitive to the need to focus research attention to address the grave nature of such violations, something that goes beyond the scope of this article. However, by highlighting, albeit briefly, the veiled barriers of oppression and marginalization of women in a deeply-gendered and hierarchical ecclesiastical organization within the patriarchal context of Hong Kong, I have sought to contribute to ongoing efforts to challenge the status quo, disrupt the silence and stimulate the promotion of gender justice and women’s empowerment. While I have focused on gender disenfranchisement, it is important to see such marginalization as one that has complex overlays with “interlocking systems of oppression,” where gender, culture and religiosity converge (Collins, 1990, p. 221).

## Conclusion

This article has shown that women clergy are not exempt from gender-biased processes and culture, which are endemic in the non-secular world. Instead, they are subjected to deeply rooted and systemically nurtured patriarchal and sexist treatment by the Church. The injustice of gender-marginalization is equally rampant and visible in the context of Hong Kong and its churches, given the profound asymmetry of vertical segregation in leadership role distribution. In order to move towards gender equity, ongoing research efforts are essential to expose and challenge these discriminatory organizational dynamics. The vertical segregation of clerical roles in Hong Kong, where women are truly unable to crack the “lead roof” in their career progression, points to their specific disenfranchisement in the local power structures of the Church that must be addressed. This article has tried to contribute to the promotion of gender equity in the church in Hong Kong in two ways: by revealing general problems of inequity that require systemic change

here and elsewhere and by pinpointing a concrete area of extreme inequality that local churches need to focus their efforts on, i.e., vertical segregation.

This paper is an initial step for future research to expose the unjust gendered treatment of clergywomen in Hong Kong. Efforts are required to broaden understanding about gendered discrimination here, demonstrated by the stark data that reveals the virtual absence of women clergy in positions of leadership and being almost totally relegated to professional roles such as in children's ministries. This case study can be pursued further to explore other modes of vertical segregation and gender asymmetry in the workforce, for example, women clergy in non-parish settings, in contrast with leadership in the church setting. Hong Kong may in fact present higher levels of exclusion of women from church leadership roles, hence, a high level of horizontal (and contractual) segregation can be expected as well, especially because traditionally gendered roles of Chinese society may further reduce their access to leadership.

This paper opens a way for Hong Kong to join the ongoing conversation in the wider global context to raise awareness about persistent issues relating to gender and leadership in the church. This study seeks to promote attention for directing policy changes informed by research, which not only would enable individual empowerment and improve support for women ministers to thrive in their vocation in the Church, but also lead to efforts for disrupting deeply entrenched institutional sexism and move towards lasting social transformation.

## Note

1. Women were banned from becoming deacons until 1986 and the ordination of women was prohibited before 1992. It was not until 2015, when the first woman, Reverend Libby Lane, was ordained and became the first woman bishop in the history of the Church of England. For more see Percy (2017, p. 99).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

*Caroline YIH* is an honorary post-doctoral research fellow at the University of Aberdeen, Scotland and honorary post-doctoral research associate at the Chung Chi Divinity School, Chinese University of Hong Kong. She completed her PhD (Practical Theology) in 2021 from the University of Aberdeen. The title of her thesis was: "Practicing in an inhospitable land: the lived experience of chaplains in Hong Kong hospitals." Her current research focuses primarily on trauma and disenfranchisement. She worked as a hospital pharmacist before completing her MDiv and has been working as a palliative chaplain in Hong Kong.

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**ABSTRACT IN CHINESE**

盡管在世俗和非世俗背景下，性別平等的發展已取得了長足的進步，但婦女依舊無法在全球範圍內獲得領袖地位，無法穿越制度化性別歧視中根深蒂固的障礙。為了打破剝奪性別權利的狀況，人們仍需要堅持不懈地努力，去揭露和挑戰嵌入式性別-組織動態的現狀。本文通過研究性別不平等的一個普遍存在的方面：垂直隔離，並重點關注目前香港教會男性主導的工作場所中，所存在的性別邊緣化待遇現象。文章揭露了香港的女性教牧人員如何無法避免性別偏見；她們是被迫在深刻的基於性別的等級制下實踐和工作。

**KEYWORDS** 關鍵詞 性別剝奪; 香港; 教會; 女性教牧人員; 制度化的性別歧視